



## National Guard Association of Connecticut

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### **Testimony in Favor of Raised Bills 313, 314, 5350, 5352, 5353 and 5388**

Good morning Sen. Maynard, Rep. Graziani and members of the Select Committee on Veterans Affairs and thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of several important proposals before you today. My name is Debbi Newton and I am the Legislative Chair for the National Guard Association of Connecticut. I have served in that capacity for the past seven years and am a 30-year member of the Connecticut Army National Guard.

Let me briefly touch on a couple of the bills before you, then I will get discuss more fully two specific bills.

#### **Raised Bill 313, ACC the Acceptability of Certain Claims for the Veterans'**

**Property Tax Exemption** is a bill that is sorely needed. Many Veterans over the age of 70, my mother among them, lost their Military Service Discharge Papers in a fire that destroyed the storage facility holding those all-important records. Without them, many Veterans are forced to either do without benefits they are entitled to, or to jump through hoops to try and prove they are indeed eligible for them. This loss of records was through no fault of their own and they should not have to suffer the consequences of an event that was far outside of their control.

#### **Raised Bill 314: ACC Military or Veteran Status on State-Issued Forms and**

Publications will assist the Department of Veterans Affairs collect data and inform our state's Veterans of all of their benefits and entitlement. Yesterday a friend of mine, a former member of the US Naval Reserve, was in Newington to fight for educational benefits he had been told somewhere along the line he was not eligible for. Not only did he find out he was eligible to have his Masters' Degree paid for, but the VA is going back and reimbursing him for all his eligible expenses for his bachelor's degree, and he found he may be eligible for an increase in his disability from 10% to 70%. Imagine how much stress this man would have avoided while going through school if he were not worried about paying his bills. 314 will help others avoid this situation. By providing a check off box on state forms, you avoid the privacy issue associated with having the military provide the names and addresses of veterans getting out of the military, and as veterans move into the state, it enables us a way to identify them and provide them the information they need as well.

**Raised Bill 5353: An Act Establishing a Task Force on Traumatic Brain Injury and Raised Bill 5388: ACC Homeless Female Veterans** are very much needed in light of the past several years. Both groups of Veterans and Servicemembers are growing daily and their needs are not being fully met. It is not because of a lack of caring or the lack of desire to help, it is because of the overwhelming numbers and the fact that we were not prepared to provide the care and attention these heroes need. The Task Force and Study these bills establish could go a long way in helping us understand and provide assistance to our Veterans and Servicemembers in need.

NGACT fully supports Raised Bill 5350: ACC Licensure and Certification Credits for Military Training, and has proposed this bill for the past two years. Last year we took a step in the right direction with passage of the CDL bill giving credit for CDL training and licensure in the military for civilian CDLs. This bill continues that common sense application. Many of our Servicemembers go to military schools to become plumbers, electricians, carpenters, mechanics, diesel mechanics, aircraft mechanics, medical professionals and spend months doing nothing but learning their chosen crafts or professions, with some training lasting more than a year. When they complete their training, they are deemed as professionals by the United States Government and are sent around the country and the world to practice their specialties. But when they return to a National Guard or Reserve Unit or come home after completing an active duty tour, they are told that what they have learned, what they have been doing, doesn't count and they have to go to tech schools, they have to become apprentices, they have to pay to take training that our tax dollars already paid for them to have. What this bill does is give credit for that training towards licensure and certification in the State of Connecticut. It does not alleviate the need for these Servicemembers to take any state-specific courses that deal with such topics as state building codes, nor does it negate the need to pay any licensing or certification fees. What it does do is give credit for training/schooling already completed through the military and has the potential to put many people into the employable workforce much quicker than they might otherwise be. NGACT urges your full support of this bill.

Finally, I want to speak to **Raised Bill 5352: An Act Proclaiming March 30<sup>th</sup> to be Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day**. I am, quite frankly, embarrassed, and ashamed, to be speaking about this bill today. I have been in the military for 30 years. Thirty years. Let me say that one more time...30 years. The last Vietnam Veteran came home a few years before I enlisted in the military and we are just now talking about welcoming them home? I realize the people in this room are not necessarily responsible for this outrageous delay, and in fact, at least two of you on this committee are Vietnam Vets, and I want to thank you for your service, for helping preserve my right to wear the uniform of the United States Army.

As a young girl, I remember being in the car with my parents and two of my younger brothers heading to Little Neck Long Island to visit my aunt and uncle. It was late because we had to wait for my dad to get out of work so we could go. Suddenly, my dad pulled the car over to the side of the road and asked a young man where he was headed. That young man was a US Navy sailor and was walking home from the train station because he didn't have the money to go any further on the train or to get a bus ticket. He had been walking along the highway for an hour, carrying his duffle bag before my dad stopped. He told the Sailor to get in the car and drove him over an hour out of our way to get him home safely and it was after midnight when we stopped. I was brought up with that kind of example of how we treat our veterans, our troops. As a young child, I thought that's how everyone treated our military members.

As I grew a bit older and started watching and understanding the news, I realized not everyone in America was like my dad. So many people were angry at our government and our leaders, but took it out on our troops. Even as a pre-teen, I knew what was happening was wrong and I joined Voices in Vital America, an organization dedicated to supporting our troops. I wore the POW/MIA bracelets proudly, and still do. I just couldn't understand how everybody wasn't a member, wasn't wearing the bracelets, wasn't supporting our troops. I still don't understand it. I never will.

A few years ago, what was billed as the official Connecticut Welcome Home of Vietnam Veterans was held in Goshen on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the return of our last troops from Vietnam. I was there. Many others were there as well, some of them are sitting in this room right now. Most of those there were Vietnam Vets, their families, or politicians. But it was an amazingly healing day for a great many of us that were there. For some the healing is still ongoing. For some it may never completely happen. I'm not even sure I will ever heal from watching our heroes being treated the way they were. If I'm still in pain from that experience, I can't even begin to imagine what pain our vets are feeling, are recovering from, and are dealing with.

Americans are finally starting to understand how much damage we did to our Troops. We, as a nation, may have done more harm to them than the enemy in the jungles of Vietnam did. So many of our Vietnam Veterans died never knowing that the American public was realizing the error of their ways and were finally starting to thank and honor our Vietnam Veterans. And who has been leading this revolution? Who has been ensuring that no other veterans are ever forgotten or treated the way our Vietnam veterans were? The very people who were treated so poorly. Those that were spat upon. Those that were treated as less than second class citizens. Those who know first-hand the pain and devastation that was caused by the American public. The Vietnam Veterans themselves.

One day a year to recognize them, their sacrifices and all that they did, and continue to do for this country, their country is certainly the least of what we owe them. It will never be enough in my eyes, but it is sorely overdue and needs to be done.

I want to thank you for indulging me in my testimony today. I know this bill will be passed by the House and the Senate and signed into law by the Governor, probably in time for the first Welcome Vietnam Veterans Day to be held on March 30, 2010, but this has been inside me waiting to be said since I was a 14-year-old girl and knew what it all meant.

And while I still have the floor, I want to ask everyone that hears or reads my testimony to do one thing. Anytime you see one of our great Americans somewhere, you can tell them usually by the baseball caps so many of them wear, or their jackets, take just a minute to walk up to them and say thank you. I was in the Keys this past November and while visiting a wild bird sanctuary, I saw a very frail older man standing off by himself in the shade smoking a cigarette. I smiled but kept walking past him. He was wearing a Korean War Veterans baseball hat. Two hours later, on my way out, I saw him still standing in the same place, but noticed how sad and bent and broken he looked. I was standing not 10 feet away from him having a cigarette, sharing his shade tree. I had trouble looking him in the eye. The poor man had been in the same spot for two hours and it was Veterans' Day. Ashamed of myself, I screwed up the courage to walk up to a man I had been staring at with pity and I extended my hand to him and thanked him for his

service to our country. Suddenly, this frail old man seemed anything but. He stood tall. He smiled. Color returned to his ashen face. His handshake got stronger, firmer, and more friendly. And he wouldn't release my hand. He looked me in the eyes and as I looked back, I could see his tears as mine started to come as well. He smiled again and said thank you, it was my duty, and I served proudly. It was a simple thing I did. Five little words and a hand shake. Thank you for your service.

If I may be so bold as to speak for our Vietnam Veterans, that's all they want. That's all they wanted 35 years ago. For someone to say thank you for your service. Passage of this bill and honoring them one day a year, will do that.

Again, I want to thank you for the opportunity to come before you on behalf of my fellow Guardsmen, Veterans, Retirees and their families. And thank you for all you do for them, I know it, and this committee, is appreciated, even though you probably don't hear it often enough. Again, thank you and I am available to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,  
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